

KASHMIR FOLK TALES

BY
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

1. Kashmir—Eden of the East
2. Kashmir in Stories

(*Kitab Mahal, Allahabad*)

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TO
PANDIT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU,
THE GREATEST SON OF KASHMIR,
AND

Sher-e-Kashmir SHEIK MAHOMMAD ABDULLAH
AND ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE FAIR VALLEY
AS WELL IS OFFERED THIS HUMBLE TRIBUTE

FOREWORD

FOLK-LORE forms a most valuable part of the literature of every country. It gives an insight into the mind and the way of thinking of the unsophisticated masses. Often it reveals the unity underlying the diversity of the human race. It shows how the urges, the emotions and the impulses of people living in different parts of the world with different atmospheres and surroundings, speaking different languages, are fundamentally the same.

The simple stories given in this valuable collection of folk-tales of the Kashmiri people make a most fascinating reading. They have many points of similarity with the folk-tales of other countries. Some epitomize the essence of the worldly experiences of the wise and are meant to serve as pointers to the right path in the pilgrimage of life. They emphasize in a picturesque form things to be avoided and those to be accepted in life and thus have a moral lesson to teach.

There are other stories which have no such lessons to give and which are meant to serve as innocent material for the whiling away of an idle hour. Icy cold Kashmir needs them indeed, where people have to bury themselves inside the four walls of their small homes to warm themselves with fire in their hearths, shutting the bitter cold of the snows out, for several months in the year. I can quite imagine young and old, men and women congregating together to while away the long winter evenings, listening to these interesting stories from their elders. They will serve the same good purpose in helping the sophisticated to spend a couple of leisure hours in an interesting way. They will also forge a link between the educated and the uneducated, bringing them nearer to each other. This link of understanding is particularly needed at this time of the world's history when the masses are coming to their own and a move for the merging together of the classes and the masses is on the anvil.

The book is timely and deserves wide patronage.

RAMESHWARI NEHRU

ABOUT THIS BOOK

THESE are folk-tales told in Kashmir—tales to which the hearts of the simple inhabitants of this smiling valley have thrilled for countless generations. Children have listened to these stories enthralled, and grown-ups too. The story teller, a silver-haired ancient maybe, has recounted them with an embellishment here and a cunning new twist there. So the stories have come to assume their present form; but in spirit ~~they are the same~~ as a hundred years ago, perhaps, kept old men from the fireside and children from their play. They ~~were~~ as folk-tales all the world over do, of jinns and witches and monstrous serpents, of the brave, handsome Prince and the lovely Princess, of the nimble-witted Vizier's son who pits his ingenuity against the villain of the piece, and of a thousand and one other likely and unlikely things.

I have tried, in these pages, to recapture the fairy enchantment of my childhood. If these stories please, it is because of the perennial freshness of the treasures of folk imagination. If, on the contrary, they fail to evoke enthusiasm, it is only that I lack the subtle genius of those story tellers of an earlier day who, far into the night, kept me awake in wide-eyed bewitchment as they unfolded their wondrous tales.

Srinagar }
May 1949 }

SOMNATH DHAR

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The Magic Ring

GULZAR WAS NEARLY twenty years of age, strong of limb and pleasing to look upon. 'Time to put his wits and enterprise to the test,' his father said to himself. He was a merchant of fabulous wealth; but he wished to reassure himself that his son would carry on worthily after he was gone.

'Here are two hundred pieces of silver, my son,' said the merchant to Gulzar, handing him a purse. 'Go forth into the world. Seek out men of high integrity and keen business acumen. There is much you can learn in their company by employing your eyes and ears wisely.'

Gulzar set out, whistling a lively tune, without a single care in the world. Late in the afternoon, he entered the market-place of a neighbouring town and observed, in one corner, four men engaged in a brawl. It was all over a cat that had wrought havoc among their poultry, and the men were quarrelling over the best means of dealing with the offender. Gulzar watched the poor little animal cowering in terror at their feet, and took pity on it. 'Do sell me the cat,' he pleaded, 'here are a hundred pieces of silver to seal the bargain.' The wrangling was soon at an end, for the men were



little loth to set the wretched brute free in return for so much wealth. Gulzar picked up the cat and proceeded on his travels.

A few miles ahead, on the outskirts of a little hamlet, the lad came upon an excited group of rustics about to kill a snake. Again, Gulzar's heart melted with pity, for he was of a very tender disposition. 'Just a moment,' he shouted. 'Let the poor creature go, and I'll give you a hundred pieces of silver in return.' This ~~boldly~~ offer, as you might imagine, did the trick.

Here was our young hero now with all his money gone and with two strange pets on his hands. How could he pursue his travels? ‘Well, I can do no better than turn back,’ he argued within himself.

When Gulzar presented himself before his father, the old man flew into a violent temper. At sight of the pets his son had come by at such expense, he was further convulsed with rage. ‘You are more of a donkey than I feared. Out of my sight! Never darken my doors again! Out you go, unless you want me to take a stick to you!’

The poor boy could not guess what he had done to merit his father’s wrath. He dragged along with a blank look on his face. There was nowhere he could take shelter. So, towards the distant stables he bent his sorrowful steps. Throwing himself full length on the piled-up hay, Gulzar wept his heart out.

As night fell and the boy dropped into a fitful slumber, his pets kept vigil beside him. The snake spread its hood out above his head, and the cat scurried after the mice that would scratch and nibble at his body.

Next morning, when Gulzar woke up, tired and aching in every limb, the snake reared itself up and addressed him. ‘Come to my father’s spring, Master,’ it said. ‘Let us visit him in the caverns deep under the waters. You have given me the boon of my life, and may well ask him for something to requite you for it.’

They dived below the deep waters and entered the Serpent-King’s domain, and the Lord of the Snakes demanded of Gulzar what he would accept as a token of his gratitude. The lad answered promptly, ‘Your magic ring, my lord, if you will part with it.’ That was at his pet snake’s whispered prompting. How could the Serpent-King say ‘no’?

Presently, Gulzar, dripping wet, emerged from the spring, grasping the magic ring in his hand.

They repaired then to a lovely site on the banks of a stream nearby, and there Gulzar, at the snake's bidding, let the sun's rays flash upon the gem set in the ring. On the instant, there was a gorgeous palace where they stood, furnished with every luxury you could ever want, and liveried servants to attend on you. In the innermost apartment was a bewitching, golden-haired maiden, crooning a sweet love-song. Gulzar took her to wife and lived in the fashion of a prince, happy as the day was long.

Many months passed by. One morning as the fairy princess was combing her golden hair by the river bank, one shining strand dropped into the water and was swiftly carried



downstream. It happened to fall into the hands of the King of a neighbouring country, disporting himself in the waters of the river. No sooner had he set eyes on it than he straightway vowed to himself that he would have none other for his queen than the maiden of this golden hair. But who she was he couldn't discover for many months, though he sent out scouts abroad in every direction of the compass. So the poor king sickened of love and grew thinner and thinner, with a fierce desire consuming his heart.

At last they fetched his old aunt to his bedside, a witch as wise and crafty as she was cruel. 'Take heart, my child,' she adjured the King. 'You will have the princess you are pining for.'

She changed herself by one of her mysterious spells into an eagle and scoured the country far and wide.

After long wandering, she came to the country where Gulzar lived with his princess. Here was the end of her restless seeking. She changed herself back into the wrinkled old woman that she was and entered the apartments of the princess. 'Ah, my child, how lovely you look, and what a fine husband you have found!' she exclaimed by way of greeting. 'Now, don't tell me you don't know your own aunt,' she added, wagging her finger mischievously in answer to the princess's look of astonishment.

So clever and so full of tricks was this witch that she had soon won the princess over. It was easy, too, to persuade the foolish, unsuspecting bride to let her inspect the magic ring. But no sooner was this priceless treasure in her hand than the wicked old woman changed herself again into an eagle and soared away.

As the King lay groaning on his sick-bed, the witch hobbled into the room. She thrust the magic ring into his fevered

hand, soothed his forehead and whispered into his ear. Then it all happened in the twinkling of an eye. As the sun's rays flashed upon the gem in the ring, the palace came floating in the air, princess and all, to where the



King stood. With a heart beating fast, he crossed the threshold, fell on his knees before the lovely, golden-haired damsel, and asked her to marry him.

What could the poor maiden say to this? She was a bit dazed after her flight across the sky. And her husband was nowhere in sight. But a slender hope fluttered in her heart. Well, this is too sudden, my lord!' she protested. 'But give me a month's time, I promise to think the matter over!' The poor

King, who was dazzled by her beauty, was content to wait. At least she was safe in his own country, and he could surely gaze upon her face and still the turbulence of his spirit.

When poor Gulzar returned from the hunt on that fateful day, he rubbed his eyes in amazement. Where was his palace, and where his own lovely princess? He threw himself on the hard stony ground in a fit of sobbing.

With a friendly *mee-aow*, his pet cat rubbed its velvet skin against Gulzar's face. 'Take comfort, master,' it purred softly. 'I'll do whatever I can to help you out.' Then it was off with a leap and a bound.

When the cat reached the palace after a long and seemingly endless journey, it was well past midnight. Whom should it then encounter but the King of Rats himself? It pounced upon him and shook him until he whined and squeaked for mercy. 'I'll let you go,' the cat said, 'if you promise to fetch me the magic ring.'

To the King of Rats nothing is really impossible. He is full of wisdom and master of a thousand wiles. Was he perturbed when his servants came round with the story that the witch had swallowed the ring lest it should ever fall into the hands of the King's enemies? He pondered the problem for an hour or two, and then tripped out of his retreat, chuckling to himself.

While the witch lay snoring, the Rat thrust his tail deep down her throat and set up a veritable aevil dance. Well, you will guess what happened. The poor old woman jumped out of her bed, clasped her temples in her hands and coughed out all the contents of her stomach. What a mess it was, and what a dismal noise she made! There was the magic ring, too, in what she had brought out. Before the old woman could

realize what was happening, the Rat had snatched it up and was out of sight.

The cat accepted the precious ring with plenty of bowing and scraping and hurried back to its master. Well, the rest is simple. The palace, and the princess too, were back in place. Gulzar was reunited to his Princess—and they lived happily ever after.

As for the witch, she stormed and stamped in her rage until she dropped dead, poor thing. What happened to

her royal nephew, the story does not tell.

But you may be sure Gulzar would never again part with the ring, not for the whole world.





THE TAILOR AND THE JINNS

A TAILOR AND A WEAVER once set out on a long journey together. They were looking for a country where they could earn much higher wages than their money-grubbing townsmen would pay. To remain for ever poor was wearisome, and visions of great wealth swam before their eyes as they pushed steadily on.

But after two days of painful trudging, the weaver's spirits flagged, his heart sickened with thoughts of home and comfort. Somewhat sheepishly, he turned to his companion. 'I dreamed last night of my wife and children,' he whined, 'and they seemed to cry out for me. I do think I must turn back.'

'So you must, indeed, my friend,' the tailor readily agreed.

As the tailor now plunged forward alone, he swung the emblems of his trade bravely before him, his metal yardstick in one hand and his large pair of scissors in the other. That seemed to give him courage.

By and by, as darkness fell, he came to a thick forest. The trees here shot up straight into the sky, and all round arose fearful sounds that chilled him to the marrow. What could the poor tailor do? He tried banging the tree-trunks with his yardstick and brandishing his scissors as though it were a sword. That helped a little.

He had not made much progress before he perceived in the gathering darkness, right in front of him, a ladder propped up against a tree taller than the rest. 'Ha, now indeed I may clamber up into safety for the night,' he murmured to himself as he set his feet on the firm, inviting rungs. Up and up he went. There were more rungs, and ever more. 'I might find myself in heaven with all this climbing!' the wretched man moaned. His feet dragged painfully and he breathed hard. But when he was about to give up this fruitless adventure he touched what appeared to be solid, wooden flooring. What a relief! He peered unsteadily into the blackness and espied some distance away a wooden cabin with a faint beam of light showing through a crack in the door.



Even as the tailor's thoughts hovered around visions of food and a bed to stretch his tired limbs on, there was an ominous rumble. The door of the cabin was flung open and out stepped the most ferocious-looking Jinn you could imagine. Eyes like saucers, a cruel hooked nose, teeth like a wild beast's fangs, a wide, cavernous mouth. The floor groaned under his weight and his voice rolled out like thunder. 'Hr.m.ph... gr... r. r... what brings you here?' he demanded.

'Not a friendly greeting!' muttered the tailor to himself. He was shaking like a leaf in a gale, of course, though luckily that escaped the Jinn's notice. But he was a brave man for his size, and his wits were as sharp as the sharpest needle he had used. In a trice he had steadied himself.

'Er . . . I am frightfully sorry to trouble you,' he brought out in level tones. 'But my master, the great Lord Solomon, will have only the best hide for his winter robe. If you will

excuse me, I must rip the skin off you' (here he snipped his scissors viciously) 'and measure it out for a coat' (with a menacing flourish of the yardstick).



'O-o-o-h,' the Jinn groaned and stepped back. It was now his turn to shiver. For all his hulking body his brains were smaller than a sparrow's! 'No, no,' he wheedled, 'perhaps you might seek else-

where? I shall, of course, . . . er, make it worth your while.'

The tailor's clever stratagem had worked; he was beside himself with relief. He now solemnly pretended to revolve the Jinn's offer in his mind. 'Well, well,' he whispered like a conspirator, ' . . . I might, you know.' But the Jinn had disappeared into his cabin. He was back in the winking of an eye carrying a bag of gold coins and a fistful of glittering gems that he thrust into the tailor's hands. 'Now if that will do, take yourself off elsewhere and leave me in peace,' he implored, and nearly pushed the bewildered tailor off the tree-top.

As for our hero, he hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his feet. He spent the night at the foot of the tree, clutching his precious treasure. When day dawned he was hurrying homeward.

Back in his town, what should the tailor do but display his wealth and strut about like a prince! They were all stunned, the good townsfolk, and none more so than the weaver who had deserted him on the outskirts of the forest. One evening he sidled up to his friend and coaxed the story out of him.

The weaver's eyes bulged with wonder as the tailor unfolded his wondrous tale. Why, they must set out again. Perhaps there was countless wealth for the mere asking, and the Jinns, poor things, were such awful nitwits!

The tailor, now grown arrogant, hardly needed much persuasion, and so one fine morning the two fared forth in search of the Jinn's secret hoard.

After three weary days of journeying, the friends found themselves in the self-same forest. It was pitch dark when they reached the foot of the ladder. Panting for breath, they gained the very top. But how utterly still things were! Not a

breath issued from the cabin. Instead, on a sudden, there arose a spine-chilling din from below.

When the two friends peered down, a most frightful spectacle met their eyes. More than a score of Jinns were seated on their haunches round a sacrificial fire, chanting, all together, a prayer to Lord Solomon. What a horrible noise they set up! A thin, old priest, meanwhile, poured oblations into the fire.



The weaver lost his nerve and toppled over the edge, right into the circle of Jinns. It was lucky the tailor kept his presence of mind. With ready wit he yelled out as loud as his lungs would permit, ‘Quick, round them up, round them up! I’ll be down in a moment with scissors and yardstick.—Quick!’

Pandemonium was let loose at the foot of the tree. Yelling and screaming, fighting and scratching, the Jinns fled helter-skelter into the forest. The poor priest fell down in a dead faint. The tailor scrambled down and saw beside the prostrate priest a large sack of gold and a heap of precious stones. It was a moment’s work to help the shaking weaver to his feet. The two then collected all that they could lay their hands on, and before daybreak turned their tired footsteps homeward.

There was wealth beyond the wildest dreams of avarice in the bag. They shared it equally between themselves and settled down to a life of plenty and ease.

And the wondering townsmen, who had heard whispered tales, pointed to them in the street and nudged one another, ‘There go the two valiant men who conquered the Jinns of the Forest!’

The wily dervish meets his fate

THERE WAS ONCE in the Kingdom of Kashmir a Dervish famed throughout the land for his learning and piety. Disciples from all over the country flocked round this holy man to listen to his teaching and to minister to his needs.

One evening, a certain disciple approached the Dervish, bowed his head before the master and, with tears in his eyes, implored his help. 'Sire,' he cried out, 'my daughter is now come of age. But, alas, where shall I find the wherewithal for her dower? Wretch that I am, who will take a beggar's daughter for his bride?'

The Dervish appeared to be lost in thought for a minute or two. 'Go home, my son,' he then gently adjured the poor man. 'All will be well. Infinite is Allah's mercy! Tomorrow I will invoke His blessings upon your child.'

Early next afternoon the disciple was nearly startled out of his wits to see the great Dervish himself standing at his door. - In a moment the little household was in the wildest bustle you could think of. Did one ever hear of such high honour? They dusted an ancient and tattered carpet and spread it out for the guest. They plied him with delicious sweets to eat and *sherbet* to drink. The mistress of the house

ran hither and thither on a hundred errands, chattering away in a delirium of excitement.

When the Dervish had rested awhile, his host led his daughter Fatima into the holy man's presence. She approached with all the bashfulness becoming to a maiden and touched the feet of the Dervish, who, thereupon, placed his hands upon her head in token of his blessing.

After all the rest had withdrawn, the Dervish addressed the disciple. 'Listen, my son,' he said with more than his wonted solemnity. 'You are poor, but your child will,



nevertheless, find a bridegroom worthy of her great beauty. God's ways are mysterious. We, poor mortals, must place unquestioning trust in Him and carry out His injunctions.

'It all came to me in a vision last night—what you must do that your daughter may win happiness,' the Dervish went on. 'Pay heed. You'll have need for high courage and boundless faith. Place your daughter in a wooden box, close it down securely and seal it. At the hour of dusk tomorrow cast this box into the river and let it drift downstream—so will your child be carried to her destiny. When you have done, repair to the solitude of your room and spend the hours of the night in prayer. Again, put all your trust in the All-Merciful and be of good cheer!' So saying, the master departed.

This Dervish, as you may have guessed already, was far from the holy man people reckoned him to be. His heart was full of wickedness, and his subtle brain teemed with snares and stratagems. Fatima was a comely maiden, radiant as the full moon. When the Dervish looked upon her loveliness he had been smitten with lust. 'I'll take her for my own bride,' he had vowed to himself. No sooner had this sinful thought seized him than his plot was hatched, for he had a nimble and resourceful wit.

Now, back in his own hut, he clapped his hands to summon the rest of his disciples. 'A great task awaits us, tomorrow, my children,' he said when they were gathered round him. 'Satan will go drifting down the river that runs past our village about the hour of sunset. Yes . . . imprisoned in a big, black wooden box, floating downstream. Assemble on the wooden bridge yonder, seize the box and carry it into my room. I shall deal with Satan, alone, behind barred doors, as is the way to deal with him. Stand outside, beat drums, blow trumpets and chant loud prayers in unison, for only thus may

the power of
Satan be utterly overthrown.
Doubtless, he will shriek, and storm and rave.
Who knows what scurvy tricks he'll try, what fiendish commotion he will raise! But pay no heed whatsoever; only drown his unholy noise in the sound of sacred music. I charge you, be bold of spirit—and breathe no word of this secret adventure abroad!'

So, that is done, the wily Dervish thought.

About sunset next day, Fatima's father, credulous fool that he was, carried out his master's instructions to the letter. Almost fainting with terror, the poor girl was borne helplessly, by slow and imperceptible stages, towards the bridge.



But the Fates were kind to Fatima. In a pleasant grove by the riverside, not far from the spot where the box had been pushed off on its perilous voyage, was the Prince of a neighbouring country, reclining after a long day's hunting. He cast his eyes lazily on the waters and espied this curious object. 'What can this be?' he wondered.

In a moment the box had been fished out and broken open. Then the Prince stepped back in wonder

as Fatima, still trembling with fear, but looking as bewitching as a fairy princess, rose unsteadily to her feet. It all happened in a whirl after that. The Prince promised to take Fatima to wife and she, reeling with happiness, was soon pouring her tale into his eager ears.

'Ah, a villain forsooth!' the Prince muttered, for he was



no fool. 'I'll teach the rascally Dervish the lesson he deserves!' He fetched one of his fiercest bloodhounds, thrust him into the box and fastened the lid down. Then he sent this strange cargo spinning down the current towards the bridge. When that was done, he set out with Fatima. For Fatima, indeed, the Dervish, black as his heart might be, had prophesied truly.

Down by the bridge, a little while later, stout hands were laid on the drifting wooden box. By nightfall the Dervish was alone in his room, all doors bolted and the precious treasure, as he thought, in front of him.

Picture the rest for yourself. the maddened hound leaping at the Dervish's throat and the fierce unavailing struggle as the wretch was torn from limb to limb. As for the disciples keeping watch outside, what indeed were they to do? The master's orders had been strict. The louder he shrieked in his death-agony, the higher rose the beat of drum, the blare of trumpets and the wail of prayers!

The wicked Dervish's sin had come home to roost!



The Treacherous Vizier

BAHADUR KHAN, King of Kashmir, was taking the air one evening in the garden set apart for the ladies of his harem. This was his private domain, where none might trespass. There was consternation, therefore, when a servant ran into the royal presence and, trembling, announced that a Faqir had strayed into this forbidden ground.

'Bring him before me,' the King ordered his guards. Was he wrathful? His tone disclosed nothing. Only a faint smile played about his lips.

It was a saintly old man they dragged before Bahadur Khan. 'What harm have I done, Your Majesty?' he asked in a voice full of gentleness.

Before the King could answer, the holy man dropped down, apparently dead. Even as the King and his courtiers were gasping with horror, a dead parrot lying in a flower-bed nearby stirred to life. It fluttered its wings for a moment and then flew away into the sky, chirping merrily. They had hardly recovered from their stupefaction at these wondrous happenings when the parrot flew back into the garden and dropped dead at their feet. A tremor seemed to pass through the Faqir's lifeless spine, and in a second he was up on his feet, smiling as if nothing at all had happened.

Bahadur Khan and his Vizier threw themselves at the Faqir's feet, for they understood he was truly a saint endowed with miraculous powers. The Faqir, pleased with their submission and moved by their entreaty, instructed them in the secret of this miracle.

Time passed by. One day while the King and his Vizier were out hunting together in the forest, they saw, lying dead



in their path, a parrot with the liveliest plumage one could ever hope to see. A great longing came upon Bahadur Khan to see this magnificent bird on the wing. Here was the moment, too, to try the skill they had been taught. ‘Do enter the parrot’s body,’ he begged of his Vizier. But the Vizier, for once, would not obey the royal behest. The more the King urged and pleaded the more adamant did the Vizier become. Was there just a suspicion of defiance on his countenance, the King wondered. But in his burning eagerness to watch the bird come to life, he dismissed the thought with a shrug. ‘Well, let me do it myself,’ he muttered. It was a moment’s work. Bahadur Khan lay dead on the ground! His spirit had wandered into the body of the parrot and the bird was beating its wings in the open spaces of the sky.

The Vizier’s eyes glittered and his thin lips twisted in a wicked grin of satisfaction. Here was the very moment for which he had long lain in wait. No sooner was the bird out of sight than he cast off his own body and entered the King’s. He was now Bahadur Khan—King of the fair realm of Kashmir. Lest the real King should ever seek to return to court, he summoned his guards and ordered the Vizier’s corpse to be chopped to little bits and scattered to the winds. He issued a royal command too that all parrots found in the kingdom be killed forthwith. His subjects would receive a handsome reward for every bird they destroyed.

As the Vizier-King (as we must now call him) rode back to the capital in triumph, the King-parrot, discovering the cruel trick played upon him, flew to the Faqir’s hermitage for refuge. ‘Do not be impatient, my son,’ the holy man stroked the bird and comforted him. Allah is All-Seeing and deals out justice to all creatures!’

Time rolled on. The Vizier-King was out a-hunting in the forest one day, when a hind of exceeding beauty streaked past in a flash of colour. He spurred his steed and set out in chase. Never yet had he ridden so fast, so relentlessly—but not an inch did he gain on his quarry. ‘What a shame to let the hind escape!’ he exclaimed bitterly as he felt his horse stumble under him.

On a sudden his eyes fell on the carcass of a panther lying in his path. ‘A panther is fleeter than the nimblest hind,’ he muttered. Quick as lightning he cast off his body and entered the panther’s to track the animal down.

Haven’t you guessed it was all the wise Faqir’s doing? The King-parrot was, you may be sure, close by, waiting to dart upon this opportunity. It was done in the twinkling of an eye. The parrot dropped dead, and Bahadur Khan had entered his own body that the Vizier had thoughtlessly abandoned in a moment of madness. Little did his courtiers realize that here was the true Bahadur Khan restored to his former estate.

The King now sent out hunters to capture the panther alive and rode back to his palace.

Next morning the Vizier-panther was wheeled in a wooden cage into the King’s presence. ‘Is that my Vizier?’ Bahadur Khan inquired mockingly. ‘Surely, I could not allow a denizen of the jungle to sit in office and offer counsel. No, that would not do at all!’ And with a loud guffaw, he ordered his guards to roast the beast alive. That was the end of the treacherous Vizier.

Bahadur Khan lived happily ever after. And, I am sure, he never again attempted the miracle of spirit transference!

‘Much too risky to try,’ he might have argued. ‘And besides I am too old now to go gadding about.

‘To live as King of this fair Valley in security is by far a more pleasant business altogether !’



SHABRANG - THE PRINCE THIEF

ONCE LONG AGO, the King of Kashmir went a-hunting in the jungle. As the sun hung low in the western sky, he gave chase to a magnificent stag and was carried farther and farther away from his capital.

In the hour of sunset, he found himself in a lovely garden. Strolling about among the exquisitely-laid-out flower beds was a beauteous



maiden, alone and unattended. ‘A Princess, surely,’ thought the King, ‘but how proud and arrogant she looks!’ She, on her part, did not as much as throw a glance in his direction. Stung to the quick, the King muttered just above a whisper, ‘I would that some prince took you for his bride and then abandoned you in this very garden! ’

The Princess (for she was, in truth, one) tossed her head in disdain. ‘I would that someone marry you and bear you a son who will wed your own daughter!’ she retorted with a pout, as she walked away.

That was, of course, more than the King could bear. But he had been deeply smitten by the maiden’s charms. ‘Come what may, I must marry her,’ he thought as he rode back to his palace. Next morning, he summoned his Vizier and the royal go-between. He bid them go post-haste to the Princess’s father, who ruled the neighbouring kingdom, and negotiate for her hand in marriage. That ruler, as one might imagine, was flattered by the suit of no less a personage than the King of Kashmir. And it wasn’t long before the messengers came back to announce the success of their mission.

A week later, the King of Kashmir rode out at the head of a glittering cavalcade to fetch his bride. People stared in wide-eyed wonder as he passed by. When he rode back with the proud Princess, the citizens again lined up all along the way. How they cheered their beauteous new Queen!

There was plenty of rejoicing all over the land, music and revelry, feasting and alms-giving. They were happy—everyone, save the bride. Yes, she, poor thing, was installed in the harem, and that was the last she saw of her royal husband. She languished in those cold, inhospitable apartments. The King would not visit her at all. ‘For what nameless, hideous sin am I being thus punished?’ the Princess wept,

wringing her hands. Then, in a flash, she recalled that first encounter in her garden. The King's vexation and his muttered oath. But she was as patient and clever as she was proud. 'That was a very foolish episode altogether,' she said to herself. 'But if the King sticks to *his* threat, I must not, indeed, forget my own retort!'

After two months of this existence, she sought the King's permission and left on a 'visit to her parents,' as she put it. Did that not please the King's foolish vanity? 'Ha, ha, ha,' he exulted. 'There, that will teach her to tilt her nose at strangers!' Little did it strike him that he was being very cruel. All because of a moment's annoyance. Of the maiden's sharp rejoinder—'Why waste thought on so idle a fancy?' cried he.

For many months the Princess abode with her parents. Then, as if on a sudden impulse, she left on a secret journey.

To the King of Kashmir, camping in a distant part of his country, they brought word, one evening, that a veiled woman sought audience with him. She was, by all signs, possessed of great wealth and beauty, they declared, but she would not say who she was. The King's curiosity was stirred. He called on this mysterious lady himself, and was admitted into her apartments. How she captivated his heart, one cannot tell, but the King soon became a slave to her slightest whim.

For a month they lived in this manner—the disguised Princess (for she was none other) and the infatuated King, who hardly guessed he had been ensnared by the very woman he had discarded. When one morning she protested she must return to her own country, they exchanged rings as a token of everlasting love.

Back under her parents' roof, the Princess bore a son as lovely as you could ever desire. Her parents, who had learned

of her clever stratagem to win her husband's favours, rejoiced in their grandson. They named him Shabrang.

Little Prince Shabrang grew up into a charming young boy, as smart as he was handsome. He excelled his companions both at his studies and on the playground. But his mother had other plans for him. Nothing would satisfy her but that he should become the most cunning thief in all the country. So she summoned all those skilled in thieving to instruct her son. To little Shabrang it was all fun; what did the innocent lad know of right and wrong? Soon he became light of finger, nimble and stealthy of movement and dextrous beyond all compare. He would steal the very morsel from your mouth with the same ease that he would snatch away the jewels on one's person. Guess at the perfection he had attained!

For his final test, his mother led him out to the foot of a steep crag and pointed to an eagle's eyrie. 'Look, my child,' she said, 'there on top is the mother eagle brooding on her egg. Fetch me the egg if you can, without disturbing the bird!'

No sooner had she spoken than Shabrang stripped himself to the waist. Hand on hand he crept up the sheer face of the rock. Not a breath of sound. Silent as a shadow, he gained the top. The bird still gazed into the lonely spaces of the blue sky. Poised for a fraction of a second on the summit, Shabrang stretched out deft fingers. Then, he was slipping down inch by inch in the same death-like silence.

As he held out the prize to his mother, she folded him in her arms with pride. Tears rolled down her eyes. 'My child, you are heir to the throne of Kashmir,' she said, speaking to him for the first time on the subject. 'Go forth and seek employment under your father. Serve him with skill and utter diligence, and win his heart. Not for one moment let him

guess your parentage. When he offers his daughter to you in marriage, say you can do naught without your mother's blessing. Send for me then!'

So Prince Shabrang journeyed far to his father's kingdom. To find employment in the royal household was easy enough—the lad had engaging looks and a pleasing wit. It was but a short step to catch the King's eye. The rest was simple. Day by day he rose higher in his master's favour. The King would have none other for his personal attendant.

Prince Shabrang, however, led a double life. The urge to practise the skill he had been taught was strong upon him. In the darkness of the night, while the city slept, he stole out on noiseless feet. How easy it seemed to him to steal from the mansions of the rich! There was no lock that he could not pick, and no treasure, howsoever jealously guarded, that he could not snatch away. As for the guards who paced the city's streets, he just snapped his fingers at them!

So, in time, the tale of Shabrang's depredations got about. Of course, none guessed who the culprit was. They only knew he was cleverer than any they had known in the past, and most elusive. To the King's court came people bemoaning their losses, and crying out aloud for protection. 'We shall be robbed of everything we possess, great Sire,' they wailed, 'unless the guards redouble their vigil and catch the villain.'

What could the perplexed King do? He sent for the chief of the city police, and ordered him, on pain of dismissal, to apprehend the rogue.

It was midnight and pitch dark as the Police Chief wandered about the city's maze of lanes and alleys. He whistled softly to himself and twirled his moustache. No thief would get past him! No hiding-place but he peered into it, no suspicious loiterer but he pounced upon him. 'Ha, who is this?

he exclaimed under his breath as a shadow flitted past, and he gave chase. When he dragged the struggling figure into the light of a street-lamp, he saw it was only a young maiden. 'What, pray, are you doing at this ghostly hour?' he demanded in his most ferocious tone, to hide his chagrin. Shivering, the girl brought out, 'The thief you have been looking for is somewhere about. I heard his stea-



thy footsteps. He may be here in a moment... O-o-oh! I am afraid.'

'Calm yourself, silly!' the chief admonished her. 'Let me think.... I shall lay a trap for the scoundrel.' There was a soft interruption from the girl. 'If you will pardon me... I suggest you disguise yourself... Why, we might exchange our garments.' She clapped her hands with delight. 'Yes... and stand beside the well yonder and pretend to be

drawing water. Now, don't you agree that's an excellent plan?"

The Police Chief fell in with the scheme readily. The girl is smart, he thought. Wrapped in her sari, he walked to the well. But poor, innocent man, what did he know of its crude mechanism? When he tugged violently at the rope, he was thrown off his balance. Next moment he was dangling at the end of the rope, just above the water's edge, inside the shaft of the well. Who was there now to pay heed to his cries for help? From somewhere above his head he heard the maiden's mocking laughter. 'They will pull you out at dawn, my friend. Now I may go about in safety!' That, as you must have guessed already, was our hero, Shabrang.

Were the honest citizens thrown into panic and confusion? The Police Chief dangling at the end of a rope, to be the laughing stock of every ragamuffin in town! The thief slipping through the fingers of the guards! 'Preposterous!' they shouted with one accord. So, in the palace yard, the people raised another big clamour!

The King was at his wits' end. Nothing could now satisfy him save the Vizier's undertaking the mission himself.

The Vizier, of course, did not relish the task of patrolling the city's twisting alleyways by night. But carry out the King's injunction he must. His horse ambled along leisurely. Its hooves beat out a plaintive tune on the ancient cobblestones. Suddenly the Vizier espied, by the flickering light of a lantern, an old, wrinkled woman grinding maize by the roadside. 'What keeps you up so late in the night, granny?' he enquired. And on an idle impulse, added, 'Have you by any chance seen our champion fogue hereabouts?'

'I wouldn't say no, I wouldn't say yes,' the old dame answered in a shrill voice. 'There are funny sounds I have been

hearing for some time. Well, he may be close by for all I know.'

It was the same ruse all over again. The 'old woman' had quickly persuaded the thoughtless Vizier to wear her rags and to sit at the grinding stone. Shabrang (again it was the Prince-Thief in disguise) was soon riding away into the night on the Vizier's horse!

There was a hullabaloo in the city next morning. Hundreds of people tumbled out into the streets crying that their hoarded treasures had been stolen. The Vizier had been discovered in an old woman's rags grinding maize by the roadside—what a disgrace!

The King was beside himself with mortification. He stormed a good deal, while his courtiers listened with heads bowed in shame. 'You are a set of idle, scatter-brained good-for-nothings! This thief has every one of us tied in knots. Listen, if the thief proclaims himself, we will give him our daughter in marriage and straightway bestow half of our kingdom upon him. He is a better man than all of you put together, I am sure.'

In the silence that followed, Shabrang stepped forth, looking like a young god. 'Is that a pledge, Sire?' he enquired. The King stared at the impudent youngster. 'Yes, indeed,' he said and stared the harder. What was so familiar about the lad's features? His thoughts chased round and round this teasing question.

'I am the thief you are looking for, Sire,' Shabrang announced amidst pin-drop silence. 'If you must have proof, I'll restore to its rightful owner every single thing that has been stolen in the city. Choose the hour, my lord, and it shall be done!'

The King's eyes softened. He had taken a great fancy to this handsome boy. And this confession of a surpassing

skill inclined his heart towards the youngster even more strongly.

But Shabrang would not marry the princess until his mother had been sent for. 'I can do naught without my mother's counsel, Sire,' he protested.

When Shabrang's mother appeared before the King of Kashmir she handed him the ring he had given her as a love-token. 'Shabrang is your son, my lord,' said she. 'How can he ever marry his own sister?'

The King nodded his head, but he hardly understood. And Prince Shabrang's mother, with gentle raillery, recalled the long-forgotten episode—the tale of an encounter in a garden, an idle oath and the angry retort that it had called forth.

There were tears in the King's eyes as he embraced his queen—tears at the same time of happiness and penitence. As for Prince Shabrang, he was proclaimed heir to the throne of Kashmir amidst a round of festivities seldom before equalled in splendour.





THE STORY TELLER AND HIS FIVE MAXIMS

ONCE, VERY LONG AGO, four friends set out on a far journey. To beguile the tedium of the hours they took turns at recounting stories. When each of them had finished his tale, they fell in with a stranger. 'Tell us a story, comrade,' they implored him with one voice.

'You shall have five stories, my friends,' the stranger replied, 'if you will pay me five hundred pieces of silver.'

'You set too high a price on your powers of entertainment,' they cried out in protest. 'But amongst the four of us, we will pay you each a hundred pieces of silver. That's good value, to be sure?'

The stranger nodded agreement, collected four hundred shining coins and cleared his throat. 'My stories aren't really stories, you must understand,' he began. 'They are maxims

for your guidance; but, let me assure you, they are worth their weight in gold. Pray, listen:

‘Money, my good friends, is meant for travel. That’s the first.

‘A friend will stand by you even while you are penniless.

‘Lean upon no relation in the hour of distress.

‘A wife is true and loyal so long as she is by her husband’s side.

‘And for my last maxim, he alone shall win the hand of Emperor Vikramaditya’s daughter who can vanquish sleep.

‘That’s all, brothers, and may the gods protect you on your wayfaring!’

No sooner had the story teller finished than the four travellers set up a clamour. Shaking angry fists in his face, they shouted that they had been brazenly cheated. What gross impudence! Stories, forsooth! At last, after they had cried themselves hoarse, they dragged the stranger into the King’s presence and laid a complaint against him.

The King listened patiently as the four men, spluttering with rage, told of the impostor’s trick. ‘Here is something intriguing,’ he said to himself. Then he turned to the victim of so much wrath and addressed him: ‘Well, my good man, what have you got to say for yourself?’

‘Sire,’ the story teller made answer with great composure, I gave them five maxims to cherish and to live by. Four hundred pieces of silver was all they gave me in return for counsel beyond all price. A paltry sum, I reckon. I shall repeat them for your royal ears, Sire, if you will deign to give me five hundred silver pieces.’

After a moment’s thought, the King summoned his treasurer and ordered the money to be counted out. Thereupon

the story teller intoned the five maxims in the same unruffled tones, and fell silent.

The King's first impulse was to laugh at this foolishness. Then he reflected on the strange words. Wouldn't it be a good idea to put them to the test? Had he not paid a whole lot of money for the advice?

One fine morning, therefore, the King sent his queen off to her parents, and announced that he was setting forth on a secret mission. At dead of night he stole out of his palace attired like a mendicant. But, in deference to the story teller's precept, he carried hidden on his person seven precious rubies.

After many weary days' journeying, the King appeared before his sister's door, begging for food and shelter. This sister was queen of a neighbouring kingdom. When she saw her brother clothed in tatters and besmeared with the dust and grime of travel, she was struck dumb with amazement. But there was not a shadow of pity in her eyes. He sought to soften her heart with a woeful tale of defeat in battle and utter ruin. She only recoiled from him in shame. 'Do not disgrace me in the eyes of my husband,' she screamed. 'Away with you and your filthy rags!'

'You are hard-hearted, my beloved sister,' said the beggar in a voice that seemed to tremble with self-pity. 'I give you my word I will not darken your door with my presence. But will you not relent just a little and send me food that I may appease my hunger? I am tired and famishing as I have never been before in my life.' As he turned to leave, he said over his shoulder, 'And as a token of your charity, please set your own seal on the dish.'

When the food was brought to the royal mendicant, he repaired to a lonely spot and buried the dish deep under the earth. Then he resumed his wanderings.



Two days later the King, still disguised as a beggar, sought the house of a friend of earlier days, in yet another kingdom. What an overwhelming welcome awaited him here! The good man rushed out and clasped the King in a fond embrace, not-



withstanding the signs of poverty and squalor that stood out on his person. He led him indoors with every mark of hospitality, gave him clean garments to wear, rich and delicious food to eat and

a soft bed to lie in. If the King was in trouble, why, here was healing for his wounds. All that this honest soul possessed was at his friend's disposal to the uttermost.

Early next morning, the King fought back his tears and

swallowed the lump in his throat as he said good-bye to his true friend. No, for all the worthy man's entreaties, he would not tarry. He had a long journey to go, he said, and many big tasks to accomplish.

As he fared forth, the King's thoughts turned on the story teller's maxims. How truly he had spoken! In the hour of one's deepest grief one's own kith and kin cast one off; while in the self-same hour one found one's anchor in a friend.

The King's wanderings now took him to the country where his queen dwelt under her father's roof. Here he found employment with the

Master of Horse to the royal household, a person of massive build, with a swaggering, handsome face, and a black, sinful heart.

Going about his errands, one evening, our hero espied a strange woman creeping stealthily into his master's inner chamber. A nameless suspicion crept into his mind. He



tiptoed to the door and peeped through the key-hole. O horror of horrors! It was his own queen with the Master of Horse! And as if to rub salt into his raw wound, he then heard soft lovers' murmurings issuing from within. How, indeed, could he bear this agony of soul!

A shout broke in upon his torment. The door had been flung open. It was the Master of Horse pointing to a broken chair. 'Hey, you, can you mend this for me, quick?'

What could our hero do but obey? As he set about the task, the guilty woman took one quick look at his face. Next moment, shaking with terror, she was whispering into her paramour's ear, 'That's my husband, that creature! May the gods help me! Send for your executioner this instant, let his head be cut off. Else I am lost!'

So the poor, innocent servant was dragged out into the forest to be dispatched to his doom. But, happily, the executioner was as covetous as he was cruel. When his victim fetched seven large, blood-red rubies out of his waistband, his eyes grew large with greed. 'You shall have three of them for yourself if you will let me go,' the King said. 'The rest you shall have for safe-keeping till I call for them.' The wretch was not loth to set his prisoner free in return for riches beyond his wildest dreams.

As the King set out once again on his travels, he said to himself, 'There's more in the story teller's maxims than appears on the surface. Here's the truth of two more revealed. Had I not carried treasure on my person I should have been a rotting carcass in yonuer forest. And woman's fidelity, ugh . . . what's it but a broken reed?

'Now for the hand of Emperor Vikramaditya's daughter. What a great prize to strive for! If only I can conquer sleep. . . .? That shouldn't be impossible, surely!'

After much wandering, the King appeared at the magnificent court of Vikramaditya. He was disguised in a sanyasin's saffron robe. 'O mighty Emperor,' he addressed the monarch on the throne, 'I am here as a suitor for your daughter's hand. The fame of her beauty and her accomplishments has travelled to far-off lands. Gladly would I abjure my vows of celibacy and renounce this monkish garb if I can win her for wife.'

The Emperor's lips curled in a smile of mockery. 'You little know the perils that beset your quest, holy man,' he said. 'Scores of stout men have perished in the attempt to win my daughter's hand. Go into her apartment tonight, if you will not be restrained by the awesome tales they tell. And if you are found alive at dawn, why, you may have the princess in marriage—with my blessings too!'

No, that wasn't enough to daunt our hero. So an hour or two after nightfall he was conducted into the Princess's apartment. She was as lovely a damsel as one could ever hope to rest one's eyes on, and full of sweet, gentle ways. The hours sped by on magic wings as she kept up an endless and delicious patter. Then, as the gong in the palace courtyard struck the hour after midnight, her eyes grew heavy with sleep. She lay back, stretched her soft limbs, yawned in the most bewitching manner and, in a trice, was fast asleep.

In the loneliness of the night the King now strove with sleep. To win this fair prize he must fight and vanquish the leaden feeling that now crept into every pore of his body. He sensed the approach of a great danger, too. 'Beware!' a voice seemed to say. Quick as lightning, he made up his clothes into a bundle the shape of a man, laid it on the silken mattress beside the Princess, and crept into a dark corner to keep watch. His shaking hands closed on the hilt of his sword. O what a dreadful vigil it was!

Slowly the rosebud lips of the sleeping princess parted. Then, as the King's blood seemed to freeze with horror, there issued from between those lips a monstrous serpent. It uncoiled its whole vicious length, reared its hood with a loud hiss and plunged its venomous fangs into the dummy beside the princess.

In an instant, the King had mastered the quaking of his limbs. He slipped out of his corner, raised the sword on high



and smote the fearful monster with every ounce of his strength. The serpent lay dead at his feet. He hacked it to pieces, gathered the mess in a heap under the couch, and then stretched his tired, aching limbs to rest.

At the hour of dawn, the Emperor's guards came, as was their wont, to carry yet another hapless suitor's corpse away. But they rubbed their eyes in wonder when the sanyasin himself, whole of limb and with a cheerful grin, opened to their loud knocking.

Vikramaditya himself came breathless to see the miracle. Had the curse on his fair daughter been lifted at last? When he heard the sanyasin's grim tale and bent to look under the couch, he knew indeed that deliverance had come. 'Now for the wedding!' he shouted as he embraced our hero.

'Not yet, my lord,' said the sanyasin, 'I have a few grave responsibilities to discharge; only then may I return to claim your daughter's hand.' He then exchanged tokens with the princess and took leave of the Emperor.

His mission accomplished, the King returned to his own kingdom amidst great popular rejoicings. Then he set forth again at the head of a shining retinue.

He first rode into the city where his sister reigned as queen. O what a splendid welcome he was accorded! But he had fetched the sealed dish of that other day. 'Remember the mendicant whom you sent away from your door with this poor gift, sister?' he asked. And the poor queen grew red with shame, flung herself at her brother's feet and besought his forgiveness.

Next, he repaired to the city where his true friend dwelt. The good man wept tears of happiness to see the King restored to his former estate, as he thought. And the King told him the tale of his wanderings and showered upon him a thousand marks of his affection and esteem.

Then he entered the city where his faithless consort abode with her father. He laid bare the story of her wickedness and of the sin of the Master of Horse. Poor wretches, what could they say when the executioner bore witness to their crimes. The erring queen's father put the lovers in chains and flung them into a deep dungeon.

And then, at last, at the head of a truly resplendent cavalcade, he rode into Vikramaditya's imperial city. The Emperor was transported with delight when he saw that his daughter's suitor was a King, no less. And the princess rejoiced that her lord and master was no mere mendicant. The wedding was solemnized with a magnificence rarely equalled at the court.

Thus ends the tale of the story teller and his maxims. That wise man, you may be certain, was not forgotten. For he was summoned to Vikramaditya's great city, where riches and honour were heaped upon him.

The Vizier's Son

'LAST NIGHT, in a dream, I beheld the most enchanting princess,' the prince confided to the Vizier's son. They were inseparable companions, and neither had a secret he would not instantly share with the other. 'She was strolling about in a garden where the breeze was laden with the perfume of sweet flowers,' the prince went on. 'Her loveliness took my breath away. She cast one lingering glance at my face, but not a word would she utter. My whole being longs for her, my friend. Whatever shall I do?'

Young as he was, the Vizier's son was full of wise stratagems. Was he not descended from a long line of Viziers whose exploits were the theme of legend and song?

'In what direction lay this garden of your dream?' he enquired.

'Oh, that's easy,' replied the prince, 'I can recall every inch of the road I took to get into that garden.'

'Set your mind at rest then,' said the Vizier's son. 'At daybreak tomorrow, we set forth along this same road. And we shall see what we shall see!'

On the morrow, the two friends rode out of the city, the prince leading the way. When the sun hung low in the western sky, they reached a strange city. Marvelling greatly at the wide avenues and the handsome mansions on either side, they ambled on until they gained the entrance to the royal gardens. Here they dismounted and crept inside, unnoticed by the sentries.

The very first person on whom the prince's eyes alighted was the princess of his dream. She was even more ravishing than the apparition of the night before. Her lips, bent demurely over a sweet-smelling flower, were like rosebuds. When she flashed a dazzling smile at the intruders from under her long, silken eyelashes, the prince quite lost his wits. But, even as in the dream, she would say naught. She only flung the flower in the direction of the moon-struck youth, tossed her golden curls, and daintily tripped out of sight.

With words of comfort and reassurance, the Vizier's son led the reluctant prince out of the garden and found lodgings for the two of them in an ancient inn. 'Take heart, my friend,' he urged, 'I promise to fetch the princess to you.'

Early next morning, the lad went out into the city and sought employment with the baker to the royal household. He worked diligently and fashioned delicious cakes of curious and bewitching patterns, especially for the princess. No sooner did the princess set eyes on the delicacies spread out before her than she sent for the baker. 'These aren't your handiwork, surely!' she exclaimed. 'No, Your Highness,' the good man confessed. 'A stranger and a stripling begged to work for me. It was his cunning hand that wrought these. They were for your special delectation he kept on saying.'

'Send him to me, quick!' the princess ordered, almost forgetting herself in her excitement.

Presently, the Vizier's son, baker's apron and all, was ushered into her chamber. The princess's questions came tumbling one upon another. The youth, smiling inwardly at her impetuous nature, told her all about the prince, how he had been smitten by her beauty and how he lay pining for love in a squalid inn not a stone's throw from the palace.

'I despair for his life, sweet princess,' he lied stoutly. 'Methinks it is a sickness of the heart that only a smile from your compassionate eyes can heal.'

The princess, being of a tender disposition, was prevailed upon to visit this ardent youth. Though she would not admit it, she had taken a fancy to the prince who had stared at her with the bulging eyes of a lovesick swain. 'I'll be at the inn at the hour of midnight,' she promised the Vizier's son.

When the prince heard the glad tidings he was beside himself with happiness. In truth, the poor lad was so overwrought that when the hour of the princess's visit struck, he was fast asleep in bed!

The early rays of the sun slanting into his apartment woke him up. As he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes he suddenly recollected the midnight assignation. He tumbled out of bed and ran to his friend's side, weeping: 'The princess....ohoh!....she broke her word after all!'

The Vizier's son was not to be taken in; however. He comforted the poor youth with kind, soothing words, and with deft fingers, meanwhile, turned out his pockets. Five glittering marbles and a dainty silk handkerchief with the princess's crest embroidered upon it dropped out. His own handkerchief

was missing. ‘Ha!’ exclaimed the Vizier’s son, wagging a finger, ‘she was here right enough! Confess now....’

Here, the poor lad burst into a fit of sobbing. He was the biggest fool you could think of—lying asleep like an ox while his dream princess had come a-visiting!

‘But, why these marbles?’ he shot at his friend between two choking sobs.

‘Ha, to remind you that you are still a baby!’ ventured the Vizier’s son with a hint of unkind mockery. ‘They are for you to play with!’

But his heart melted with pity as the prince yielded to a fresh outburst of grief. He gently patted his friend on the shoulder, whispered words of courage and sallied forth again.

The baker’s apprentice was soon face to face with a somewhat indignant princess. How, indeed, could he make excuses for his friend? How could he mollify this lovely creature? She was stamping about the room, her silver anklets beating out an angry tune.

But the Vizier’s son was as resourceful as he was determined. He pleaded and cajoled as never before. By slow degrees, the princess was won over. The cloud of anger vanished from her brow. Her cheeks dimpling with smiles, she was promising to visit the prince again at the hour of midnight.

You may be sure that this time the prince was very wide awake when the fateful hour struck. She looked more adorable than ever before. She bubbled over with laughter and kept up a continuous chatter about sweet nothings. And the prince, who couldn’t take his eyes off her lovely countenance for a moment, bethought himself in very heaven.

But the Fates (alas!) were unkind to the poor innocent lovers. Jealous of their happiness, perhaps, they sent the



Vizier of the kingdom prowling about that very quarter of the city. As he stood in the cobbled alleyway beside the inn, the tinkle of girlish laughter fell upon his ears. One hand astride his waist and the other stroking



his moustache, he looked up. The voice that was wafted down to him—yes, it was not unfamiliar ‘Ah, our naughty little princess!’ he exclaimed with a malicious flick of his fingers. Next moment, he broke in upon the lovers. ‘Here’s a pretty

kettle of fish!' he bellowed. At a signal from him, the city guards rushed in and hauled the two tender creatures away to prison.

The Vizier's son wrung his hands in despair when they brought him news of the tragedy. But his nimble wits were racing ahead with schemes. In the first flush of dawn he was hobbling along in the guise of an old woman, bent over a gnarled stick and carrying a basket of wheaten cakes on his head. At the prison gates the guards at first laughed at granny's importunity. She whined that she was on an errand of mercy. But presently they relented. If the kindly old soul must fetch food for the unfortunate creatures in their cell, who were they to say 'no'?

No sooner was the old woman inside than she sprang to life. It took her only two winks to gain the cell where his friends were confined. Between tears and laughter, the princess quickly slipped on the disguise and then, bent double, hobbled past the gates under the very noses of the guards.

Two hours later, the Vizier dragged an incredulous king to this same prison-cell. 'Your daughter, Sire!' he cried out triumphantly, pointing a finger at the lad swathed in the princess's sari. The king lifted the veil, scanned the face underneath and discovered that he had been put upon. What a stupid prank, and what a wicked slander against the child he so dearly cherished! Eyes blazing with fury, he turned on the Vizier with drawn sword, and before the wretch could bring out a single word of explanation, his head was rolling on the prison floor.

The prince and the Vizier's son were set free, it is true. But of what avail was freedom when the whole city was winging with the news that the princess was soon to wed the king of a neighbouring country? There was little our Vizier's son could do about that. For the princess, notwithstanding all her

protestations, had been betrothed long since. Today, the city was all a-flutter. Floral arches, banners and gay festoons seemed to have sprung up wherever one cast one's eyes.

Again, with a sinking heart, perhaps, the Vizier's son set about laying his plans. As baker's apprentice, he contrived to gain the ear of the princess. His tongue had lost nothing of its cunning, his wits none of their sharpness. But could he accomplish a miracle in the little time left before the wedding day?

When the royal bridegroom arrived, our princess was outwardly composed. On the day of the wedding, she was all that a bashful bride should be. A proper veil hid the glint of resolution in her eyes. The women of the palace fussed over her. There was music everywhere, and peal upon peal of merry laughter. Then came the priests and their tiresome ceremonial.

At last the time came for her to leave her parental home with her bridegroom. To the playing of pipes and the beating of drums, the gay procession made its way out of the city. The bride, in silk and brocade, was borne in a golden palanquin. Who could guess at the flutter in her little heart?

At the hour of dusk, they halted in a forest glade for the evening's repast. It all happened then in less time than it takes to tell. The Vizier's son, veiled from head to foot, slipped into the palanquin. The princess stole away to where the lovelorn prince kept impatient vigil, to be caught up into his saddle and whisked off.

The Vizier's son, as you may imagine, did not enjoy being coupled up in a palanquin. Soon, however, the bridegroom's sister clambered in beside him. She, unsuspecting girl, had come out of pure kindness to keep the lonely bride company. The lad, as you know, was endowed with a tongue that could

melt a stone; and when he found the maiden as lovely as she was intelligent, he laid siege to her heart. Before the party set up camp for the night he had scattered all her defences. She was willing, she confessed demurely, to follow him to the ends of the earth. So, under cover of darkness, he stole away with his prize to join the waiting prince.

Early next day, the friends journeyed back to their own kingdom. O what a joyous welcome they received, for the parents, poor distracted souls, had almost given them up for lost

And how much more was their gladness when they discovered that they had both fetched for themselves brides more beautiful than they could ever think of.

